



# The Absurdity of Survival in Albert Camus' *The Outsider* Decoding the Character of Meursault

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**Abstract.** Albert Camus' renowned work of literature, *The Outsider* reflects the author's contemplation and comprehension of the human struggle for existence through its protagonist, Meursault. Meursault's emotional detachment and bizarre conduct in his life depict the seeming absurdity of the human condition. This article analyzes the character of Meursault through an examination of his characterization, the rationale behind his portrayal, and an interpretation of the novel's themes. The study reveals the novel's unique style of portraying the absurdity of life and the human search for meaning, highlighting the connections between the character's construction and the novel's underlying themes.

**Keywords:** Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, absurdity, character portrayal, human condition.

## 1 Introduction

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a renowned French existentialist and philosopher whose works explore the theme of absurdity, reflecting his belief in the meaningless yet resilient nature of human existence.<sup>[1]</sup> His novel *The Outsider* (also known as *The Stranger*) is considered a seminal piece in Western literature, embodying his philosophical ideas through the character of Meursault. Meursault is a dispassionate and emotionally detached protagonist, indifferent to societal norms and values. Following his mother's death, he exhibits a surprising lack of grief, focusing instead on mundane pleasures such as dating his girlfriend. His detachment escalates as he commits an apparently senseless murder and later faces a trial where he passively accepts his fate, never pleading for innocence.

Despite this, Camus subtly infuses moments that hint at Meursault's underlying connection to life. For example, after a rigorous interrogation, Meursault finds comfort in simple pleasures like the sound of birds and the lively bustle of crowds. These fleeting joys suggest a deeper, albeit subdued, attachment to existence, revealing Camus's nuanced portrayal of human experience.

*The Outsider* is succinct in style yet dense with philosophical implications, inviting multiple interpretations of its existential themes. Through Meursault's journey, Camus presents a vivid exploration of absurdism, emphasizing the tension between life's

inherent meaninglessness and the human desire to find purpose. This article seeks to delve deeper into the novel's intricate layers, analyzing key moments and philosophical insights that define *The Outsider* as a pivotal work in understanding Camus's thought.

## 2 The Characteristics of Mersault's Image in *The Outsider*

The story opens with Meursault's hauntingly detached statement: "Today, Mother died. Maybe it was yesterday, I don't know".<sup>[2]</sup> From this moment, Camus introduces the protagonist's emotional disconnection, but beneath this apathy lies a complex web of unspoken feelings. Although Meursault outwardly displays little emotion, his reaction to his mother's death reflects a profound, albeit suppressed, emotional response. The telegram informing him of his mother's passing elicits only a minimal reaction, and Meursault seems more inconvenienced than grief-stricken. When he has to borrow a "black tie and mourning-band" for the funeral, his irritation suggests his struggle with outwardly expressing what he feels inside.

Meursault's refusal to take a last look at his mother's body before the coffin is sealed further reinforces his emotional detachment. This action, or lack thereof, suggests not that Meursault lacks feeling, but that he cannot confront his emotions in conventional ways. His grief is internalized, hidden behind a facade of apathy. After the funeral, instead of mourning, he admits to feeling "the joy of thinking I would soon be sleeping for twenty-four hours in a row". To Meursault, death is part of the inevitable course of life, and his mother's death is merely an extension of this natural process. He finds solace in sleep and routine, a temporary escape from the absurdity of existence.

Meursault's existential beliefs reflect his acceptance of the absurdity of life. His mother's death symbolizes not just loss, but freedom — both for her and himself. In his view, she has been liberated from the monotony of her existence, and he too can return to his own life, unburdened by societal expectations of grief. This detachment is contrasted by his neighbor Salamano, whose grief over losing his dog reveals Meursault's own hidden depths. Salamano remarks that Meursault has "deep feelings", suggesting that his apparent coldness conceals a more complex emotional life.

While others criticize Meursault for placing his mother in a nursing home, he defends his decision, claiming that she was "cooped up with nothing to do" at home. This statement highlights Meursault's pragmatic approach to life. Rather than adhering to societal norms of care and affection, he prioritizes practicality, ensuring that his mother at least had companionship in her final years. His actions, though misunderstood by others, demonstrate a quiet sense of responsibility toward his mother, albeit one that is not conventionally expressed through emotion.

Meursault's emotionally indifferent exterior conceals a sincere and quiet love for his mother, even if it doesn't align with society's expectations. For Meursault, his mother's death represents a form of relief for her, and this view reflects his broader philosophy of life's inevitable, predetermined nature. Yet, society harshly condemns him for his perceived lack of emotion, culminating in his execution "simply because he did not cry at his mother's funeral". In Camus' *The Outsider*, Meursault's failure to adhere to the expected public displays of grief becomes an indictment of his character, as society

demands conformity to conventional expressions of love and sorrow.<sup>[3]</sup> His rejection of these norms reveals his desire to live authentically, in line with his personal convictions, rather than perform for the approval of others.

Despite his calm detachment, Meursault's inner life is far from devoid of feeling. His choices, though misunderstood, are born out of a sense of compassion for his mother. He believes that placing her in a nursing home was the best decision for her well-being, providing her with companionship rather than isolation. However, this decision, much like his apparent apathy at her death, draws criticism and alienation. Meursault's fate ultimately highlights the absurdity of societal rejection, as he becomes a scapegoat for violating societal norms. Customs and social rituals, such as the expected grieving process, serve as masks that people wear to avoid confronting deeper feelings of insignificance, loneliness, and emptiness. Through Meursault's exclusion, Camus illustrates how society enforces conformity to protect individuals from the harsh truths of the human condition—truths that Meursault, in his indifference, openly acknowledges.

For Meursault, life follows a predetermined cycle from birth to death, governed by the laws of nature, which he deeply respects. He acknowledges death as an inevitable conclusion and sees no point in fighting or grieving over it. When confronted with his mother's passing, Meursault claims, "It's not my fault", reinforcing his belief that death is a natural, uncontrollable part of life. His existential outlook—centered on the idea that the world is absurd and meaningless—leads him to view life from an outsider's perspective. He enjoys observing the lives of others but remains acutely aware of life's repetitive, cyclical nature. After the funeral, Meursault reflects that "tomorrow it'll be back to work, life will be the same, no change at all", underscoring his resignation to the unchanging and absurd reality of existence.

In the end, Meursault's refusal to conform to societal expectations costs him his freedom and ultimately his life. When asked by the judge if he loves his mother, he replies, "like everyone", a response that mirrors the generalization and indifference he applies to much of life. Meursault's inability—or unwillingness—to perform emotions as society dictates becomes his greatest transgression. Camus uses Meursault's story to explore profound themes of individual freedom, existential meaning, and the tension between personal authenticity and societal norms. Through Meursault's rejection of performative behavior, *The Outsider* questions the very nature of human existence and the price of living authentically in a world that demands conformity.

### 3 Reasons for the Construction of Meursault's Image in *The Outsider*

Albert Camus' construction of Meursault's image is closely related to his life experiences and the social changes of his time. In his work, Camus displays the collapse of people's beliefs, the absurdity of existence, and the world's desolation.

After the World War I, people's human dignity was threatened, and the worldwide economic depression made people feel a sense of survival crisis. The development of science and technology controlled and managed social life, thus breaking people's

independence and creativity. Existentialism emerged from people's sense of the bleak and void of life. After rising in Germany in the 20th century, it spread to France, and Camus was an important representative figure. He used the absurd emotional experience to express the philosophical thoughts of existentialism. People's existence faced a crisis. Losing the sense of security made people's optimism about rational science turn to "the tragic feeling of the desperation of human existence".<sup>[4]</sup>

Camus realized that a mechanical and tedious life made people disgusted. When people began to doubt their own existence and meaning, answering this state became an attack on the absurdity of human existence. "Getting up, taking the tram, four hours of work in the office or factory, eating, taking the tram, four hours of work, eating, sleeping, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, always in rhythm, and most of the time, they easily follow this path. Only one day, the questioning of 'why' arises, and everything starts in this kind of surprised boredom".<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, when people realize that daily life is a monotonous and boring process, and feel the pain of existence, they will feel isolated from their individual and social roles, and the absurdity of existence arises.<sup>[6]</sup>

Through *The Outsider*, Camus explores the spiritual awakening and resistance process of facing the absurd reality. In Meursault's world, most people follow predetermined habits and rules of life. In these rules that are advertised as rational standards, people's personalities are smothered by social systems. The general public lives in a tightly controlled social system and cannot escape. Camus depicts Meursault's life situation to show the absurdity of the relationship between people and the world. Meursault realizes the absurdity of fate and does not want to live in accordance with social rules like ordinary people. Instead, he chooses to retain his true self. Camus uses Meursault's spirit of freedom and resistance to show his dialogue with the absurd world.

#### **4 Interpretation of the "Absurdity" Theme in *The Outsider***

In *The Outsider*, the theme of absurdity is intensified through three deaths, with the first being Meursault's mother's death at the beginning of the story. The second death occurs when Meursault kills an Arab, and the climax is reached when Meursault is sentenced to death. These three deaths deepen the theme of absurdity. The narrative of *The Outsider* is in the first-person perspective, but Meursault's inner world is detached from the outer world. The narration presents many seemingly meaningless daily life scenes, giving readers a sense of absurdity that is neither recognized nor understood.

When Camus tells Meursault's story, he shapes him into an "Outsider" to society. Meursault's behavior and emotional expressions are not logical, and his actions are sometimes bizarre. He does not shed tears when his mother dies, he cannot express "love" to his girlfriend but is willing to marry her, and he even shoots and kills a man because he is dizzy from the sun's heat. By depicting the everyday life of an ordinary person, Camus provokes deep thoughts. As a small office worker in society, Meursault is powerless to change or resist. His nonchalant attitude towards life becomes his weapon in rebelliously confronting the absurdity of reality.<sup>[7]</sup>

During the trial, Meursault is seemingly being tried according to strict procedures. The judges appoint a lawyer to help defend him, and during their conversation, the judge praises the law as being “well formulated”. However, when Meursault wants to argue his case, the lawyer advises him to “not say anything, it will be better for your case”. Meursault sees that his case is proceeding without his participation, and his fate is actually being decided by others. The objective appearance created by the criminal trial process is quickly replaced by absurdity. Even after Meursault is sentenced to death, when the judge asks him if he has anything to say, Meursault’s silence demonstrates his realization of the intrusion of ideology into the legal system, which exposes “the absurdity of modern judicial systems”.<sup>[8]</sup> Although Meursault has committed a crime, the reasons given for his sentence in the legal trial reveal a detachment from reality.<sup>[9]</sup>

In the true absurdity of life, Meursault stands as a sober and indifferent outsider, caught within the rigid and mechanical social rules that govern human behavior. His detachment and refusal to conform are not acts of apathy, but rather his way of confronting the absurdity of existence with the unflinching truth of his own being. The more society imposes its rules and norms, the more individuals, like Meursault, lose their sense of individuality and freedom. Meursault’s refusal to pretend or perform, in a world where people often hide behind customs and societal roles, underscores his profound awareness of life’s absurdity.

Meursault’s realization of the meaninglessness of life gives him a kind of “heroic magnificence in life,” as he courageously accepts the absurdity rather than denying or avoiding it.<sup>[10]</sup> Unlike those around him who cling to illusions of meaning, Meursault embraces the absurdity head-on. His silence, his refusal to grieve publicly for his mother, and ultimately his willingness to accept death on his own terms, are acts of existential defiance. Meursault’s final response to the absurd society he inhabits is not one of resistance through words, but through action—or inaction—allowing silence and death to serve as his ultimate rejection of a world that demands conformity.

In Camus’ portrayal, Meursault’s confrontation with absurdity becomes a deeply personal and philosophical stance. He refuses to adopt the comforting lies that society offers, such as religious salvation or moral righteousness, and instead chooses to live authentically, albeit at great personal cost. His acceptance of life’s absurdity, coupled with his unwillingness to conform to societal expectations, positions Meursault as a tragic but heroic figure. His existence, marked by indifference and silence, is a response to a world that he sees as meaningless, and his death becomes the final, silent affirmation of his own existential freedom.

## 5 Conclusion

In *The Outsider*, Camus presents a world governed by social norms in which the meaning of individual existence is undermined by the absurdity of life. Meursault, the protagonist, perceives the inherent loneliness and helplessness of human existence within this absurd framework, yet he chooses to confront it with the truth, refusing to abide by society’s expectations. His rejection of conventional norms and willingness to face the

absurdity head-on underscores Camus' existential exploration of how individuals survive in a world devoid of inherent meaning.

Through Meursault's existence, Camus delves into the existential struggle between individuality and societal pressure. Meursault's detachment, seen in his indifferent response to his mother's death and his refusal to conform to social norms of grief, becomes a direct challenge to society. His actions, though sincere, are judged harshly, as society demands adherence to its rituals and conventions, and Meursault's nonconformity ultimately leads to his tragic end. However, Meursault's fate is not merely a critique of social rejection; it also serves as a broader philosophical inquiry into how individuals reconcile the absurdity of life with the pressures of societal expectations.

Meursault's tragic existence provokes readers to reflect on the reconstruction of the relationship between the individual and society. In the world of *The Outsider*, the struggle between personal authenticity and societal conformity becomes an existential battleground. Meursault's defiance in the face of absurdity—choosing truth over performance—raises questions about the role of individuality in a world that often values conformity over honesty. His fate prompts a deeper contemplation of how society often rejects those who challenge its norms, while also awakening a sense of self-awareness in readers about their own position within these societal frameworks.

In conclusion, *The Outsider* not only reveals the absurdity of existence but also highlights the individual's struggle within that absurdity through the character of Meursault. His tragic journey reflects the existential challenges individuals face in a world that often seems meaningless. By confronting the absurd with honesty, Meursault becomes a symbol of existential defiance, compelling readers to rethink the relationship between the individual and society. Ultimately, Camus' work is a profound exploration of human existence, and its existential themes continue to leave a lasting impact on readers, solidifying *The Outsider* as a cornerstone of existential literature.

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